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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest explores the need for improvement in geography education in the United States, based on concern expressed by geography professors across the United States and findings from a number of recent state, national, and international polls and studies showing that many students leave high school illiterate in geography. A section synthesizing the findings of six recent studies characterizing elementary and secondary students as illiterate in geography is followed by an examination of possible reasons for the problem. Positive steps to improve geography education include the development of guidelines focusing on what should be taught in geography by the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers. Short- and long-term tasks to promote geography education include the development of grade-by-grade curriculum guidelines with activities; a network of people to serve as consultants in geography education; model workshops and materials for improving geography education; an information network in geography to share news about such things as new materials, notes on important reports, workshops, conferences, and professional training; the addition of a geographic component to admissions requirements at some colleges; and the addition of geography as a required course in the high school curriculum. A list of 12 related resources concludes the digest. (LH)

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IMPROVEMENT IN GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION

by Sydney J. Meredith

For several years, the media have reported on the ignorance on the part of U.S. students about geography. Geography professors at various universities and colleges across the United States have expressed their concern that entering freshmen are not adequately prepared in high schools. Professors complain that they must begin their courses offering remedial geography that students should have learned in high school. The claims of these professors are substantiated by a number of recent state, national, and international polls and studies showing that many students leave high school without the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that (1) they need to be good citizens and (2) are important outcomes of geography programs.

How serious is the problem of geography education (or lack thereof) in the United States? What are the prospects and pre-conditions for improvement? This Digest explores the nature of the problem and steps currently being made to effect its solution.

Are students illiterate in geography?

A few of the numerous studies that have characterized elementary and secondary students as illiterate in geography are:

—1979 (NAEP). The National Assessment of Educational Progress study indicated that geographic knowledge of high school students is inadequate and that enrollment and achievement in geography education are low.

—1981 (Barrows and others). A survey by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) showed students' international knowledge and understanding was extremely low.

—1981 (Hill). Hill analyzed results from the ETS test for its geographic content. He argues that students would have done better on the test had they taken geography courses.

—1983 (Dallas Times Herald). Geography tests dealing with questions about relationships (rather than place/name items) were administered to 12-year-olds in eight industrialized developed nations. American students ranked a weak fourth among the eight groups.

—1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education). *A Nation At Risk* declared that geography teaching needs improvement and that high school geography courses, although offered, were completed by only 16 percent of students in a recent sample of high school graduates (Altschul 1984).

—1984 (Kopec). Over 2,000 students in introductory college classes at the University of North Carolina were surveyed and tested on geography. The percentage of students never having had a geography course was high—71 percent never had geography instruction in elementary grades, 65 percent in junior high, and 73 percent in high school. Ninety-seven percent of the freshmen and 93 percent of the upperclassmen failed. Similar results were obtained by Ligocki (1982).

Why do students know so little geography?

Vuicich and Stoltman (1975) describe a number of historical events, such as the 1911 National Education Association secondary school curriculum review, which have had an effect on geography's role in the curriculum. The review "conceived social studies to represent a single field of study encompassing all the social sciences, without discipline boundaries" (p. 7). As a result of such reports, geography has historically been treated as a component of all social studies coursework rather than as a separate curriculum. Within the social studies, geography tends to be overshadowed by history, government, and civics. When offered, it is usually an elective in senior high schools; when it is required, it is usually taught in grade seven.

A number of geography educators suggest that the education of Americans in geography could be made stronger if geography were taught as a separate, required high school course; if teachers were adequately prepared to teach geography; and if the public recognized the importance of the subject. Salvatore J. Natoli, Educational Affairs Director of the Association of American Geographers, urges that geography can be treated as a unique discipline in the public school curriculum. A separate geography course would emphasize certain principles basic to modern geography: conceptual, attitudinal, and skill learning which offers a powerful, transferrable learning experience for students, helping them to develop tools to cope with the changing world (Natoli 1985).

Another reason for teaching geography separately is that teachers' preparation and state certification requirements for teaching geography would become more stringent. Because many teacher education programs prepare social studies teachers to teach multiple courses rather than focus on one specialty such as geography, it currently appears possible to teach elementary social studies without having had a single geography course and to teach high school geography with only six credits of study (Winston 1984).

As to one possible reason why the status is low, Winston points out that secondary and elementary school geography lacks credibility among the general public, school personnel, and students. She references Gallup polls to show that the general public tends to regard social studies as less useful than many other areas of the curriculum and she states that "if the public perceived greater value for student learning in geography, inservice teachers might be encouraged by school administrators to improve their preparedness in the subject and their abilities to teach related knowledge and skills" (p. 138).

What is being done today to improve geography education?

Recently, many efforts have been made to combat the negative aspects of geography education shown by the studies cited above.

The most positive steps to improve geography education have been efforts of the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers. Offering strong leadership and direction to this urgent need, these educators have recently co-published guidelines focusing on what should be taught in geography. Intended as a current statement for improving geography education, these guidelines have been widely circulated in the United States.

In addition, these organizations have made plans to accomplish short- and long-term tasks to promote geography education. Some of these include development of grade-by-grade curriculum guidelines with activities; a network of

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people to serve as consultants in geography education; model workshops and materials for improving geography education; and an information network in geography to share news about such things as new materials, notes on important reports, workshops, conferences, and professional training.

States and school districts are also working hard to put geography education into the classroom as a separate discipline. For example, the University of Colorado has instituted a geography admissions requirement; some school districts have added a required course in geography to the high school curriculum (e.g., San Diego, California's Unified School District); and Tennessee, Texas, and South Dakota have implemented statewide requirements.

Conclusion

Geography educators have identified the need for curriculum change and have developed mechanisms for accomplishing this task. To date, their efforts have been noteworthy and offer promise for significant improvements for the benefit of students and the public.

RESOURCES

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information write EDRS, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

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